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ABSTRACT

The United States blood plasma industry uses various rhetorics to access donors and markets its products while managing its stigma and potential legal liability. The industry includes both the public "nonprofit" sector and the private, for-profit blood collection and manufacturing businesses owned by pharmaceutical companies that rely on paid "donors." The industry suffers from the stigmatization of the commodification of the human body and is seen as exploiting its paid donors. Representative examples from generic sources of written materials directed to industry audiences show that the major persuasive strategy for recruiting donors is "easy money." A display advertisement in a university student newspaper announced "Do you know that blood donation can add up to $500 each quarter!" Other ads targeted at students focus on money for "spring break" or for "back to school." Medical rhetoric is also prevalent--the antiseptic atmosphere in college centers suggests that the staff are trained professionals, although this is not always the case. The "gift" metaphor figures prominently in the development of national blood banks such as the Red Cross--this image of a gift freely given sanitizes the blood trade somewhat. Invocation of a pseudo-community linking giver and receiver is also used in promotional materials, but without mentioning the racial and class composition of the mostly lower-class donor base, or the legal protection from liability sought by the powerful industry. (Contains a table of data and 11 references.) (NKA)

SANITIZING RHETORICS OF THE COMMERCIAL BLOOD PLASMA INDUSTRY

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Presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, D.C., March 25, 1995.

It would be difficult to find a substance that has been held sacred cross-culturally more than human blood. Given its sacred status, it has been the focus of intense and extensive moral debate, figuring prominently in the symbolism and rituals of both religion and war. In the past century, with the development of medical science and technology, blood has become increasingly subjected to a secular gaze. The ascendence of a medical orientation to blood, especially when tied to its production as a commercial commodity, has produced new arenas of moral debate. Indeed, as Kimbrell has noted, "The controversy about blood that developed in the 1950s and 1960s became the greatest public debate about the ownership of human tissues since slavery" (1993: 11). In this presentation we explore the ways in which the U.S. blood plasma industry, attempts to frame its activities. We explore the different rhetorics or vernaculars of discourse through which the industry accesses donors and markets its products while managing its stigma and potential legal liability.

First, however, we need to provide a brief, simplified overview of the blood products industry in the U. S. The industry is divided into two sectors: the public

"nonprofit" sector including the Red Cross and other blood banks that recruit voluntary unpaid donors and another sector consisting of private, for-profit blood collection and manufacturing businesses owned by pharmaceutical companies that rely on paid "donors." These sectors are also distinguished according to what they collect. Unpaid donors for the nonprofit sector almost exclusively contribute whole blood, while paid "donors" in the commercial sector generally sell only their blood plasma (Drees 1983).

Plasmapheresis, or the collection of plasma, developed in the 1950s and offered several improvements in transfusion technology. First, plasma is more easily stored and, second, since plasma products don't contain red blood cells, they can be used by individuals with any blood type (Espeland 1984). But most importantly, the body rapidly replenishes plasma. Whole blood donors are limited to giving blood a few times per year, but U.S. plasma donors can donate twice weekly, up to 60 liters (in excess of 15 gallons) annually-- incidentally, by far the most of any country in the world. Unlike "voluntary" whole blood collection, which typically relies on infrequent donations from a large donor pool, the plasma industry relies on a smaller pool of repeat donors who receive from seven to twenty dollars per donation (Reilly 1985). The plasma industry is a two billion dollar a year business dominated by U. S. companies which supply over half of the world's plasma products--leading some observers (e.g., Kimbrell) to refer to the U.S. as the "OPEC of the blood trade."

The plasma industry has a negative image for several reasons. The industry suffers from the general stigmatization of the commodification of the human body (Espelar l 1984). It is also associated in the public consciousness with lower class individuals, who are perceived to be at a high risk for blood transmissible diseases such as hepatitis and AIDS (Anderson and Snow 1995, Kretzmann 1992). This, in fact, has been the primary criticism of the plasma industry (von Schubert 1994). Finally,

although this has received less attention, plasma centers have been criticized for exploiting their poor donors (Anderson and Snow 1995, Snow and Anderson 1993, Wiegand 1989).

So how does this profitable industry ward off criticism and sustain its position in the face of moral, medical, and legal challenge? Sociologists who study deviance have frequently explored the ways in which stigmatized individuals manage their "spoiled identities" (e.g., Goffman 1963). We seek to identify the major rhetorical strategies the plasma industry uses to manage its at least tarnished identity.

DATA SOURCES

Given our interests, we sought to collect representative examples from each generic source of written material directed to major industry audiences, especially to plasma "donors," to medical personnel who administer blood products, and to the courts that have been the site of product liability litigation. Table 1 (following page) summarizes the materials that form the basis of our analysis.

RHETORICS OF THE COMMERCIAL PLASMA INDUSTRY

The Rhetoric of "Easy Money"

The major persuasive strategy for recruiting paid plasma donors, not surprisingly, is money, as demonstrated quite simply in a newspaper classified advertisement from a Baton Rouge plasma center stating "EARN $$$$$$$." "Cool Cash," as another ad proclaims, is what selling plasma is all about. Plasma centers are quick to emphasize that the money may be more than you'd think. A recent display ad in the Ohio State student paper, announces, "Do you know that [regular donation] can add up to $500 each quarter!"

TABLE 1: DATA SUMMARY

DATA SOURCE	TIME FRAME	NO. OF OBSERVATIONS
1. Donor Advertising		
Ohio Univ. Post	1993-94 Academic Year	23 Advertisements
Ohio State Univ. Lantern	1993-94 Academic Year	8 Advertisements (Convenience Sample)
City Newspapers*	1994-95	9 Advertisements from 4 Major Cities
Plasma Center Hand-outs	1984-1995	6 Plasma Centers
2. Publicity Materials		
ABRA Promotional Mtls.	1993-94	2 Issues of Industry journal. 1 Promotional Packet
3. Consumer Advertising		
Product Advertising in Blood (Hematology journal)	1980-1994	32 Advertisements
4. Participant Observation		
Plasma Centers in 4 cities	1984-1995	18 Observational Visits in 8 Plasma Centers
5. Legal Materials		
Law Journals	1987-1995	12 AIDS Litigation Review Articles
6. Comparison Materials		
Observation of Red Cross Student Blood Drives	1994-95 Academic Year	4 Observations
Student Blood Drive Advertisements	1994	6 Newspaper Advertisements 4 Advertising Flyers

*Major city newspapers include the Mobile Press Register, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Baton Rouge Advocate and the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

Equally important as the amount of money is the message that it's "easy money." One way to convey the "easy money" impression is to offer special coupons, such as a Sera-Tec coupon that "for a limited time" offers $20 to new donors. The "lots of money" and "easy money" motifs can be combined, of course, as in the case of a Sera-Tec coupon showing a "fistful of dollars." The message is clear: easy money, lots of it.

Yet other advertisements focus attention on just what the "easy money" can buy, as in a "spring break" ad for getting together money for fun in the sun, or, alternatively, a "back to school" ad (with the virtually the same illustration) that offers help with paying for the previous summer's fun (creative diversity isn't a hallmark of this advertising).

The "easy money" rhetoric gets donors in the door and helps keep them coming back. But as pervasive as this discourse is (and we've only found one ad that didn't have it), it's seldom used alone. Few centers frame selling plasma as an exclusively economic arrangement. Recognizing the multiple stigmas attached to the commercialization of the human body, plasma centers attempt to sanitize their business (both physically and morally) by incorporating two other rhetorical idioms: the rhetoric of "the gift" and the rhetoric of "medical service and technique."

The Rhetoric of the "Gift"

The image of a gift is of something freely given with goodwill and sense of social connection and responsibility. The gift metaphor has figured prominently in the development of national blood banks such as the American Red Cross. The commercial plasma industry has adopted this metaphor, attempting to encourage audiences to associate selling plasma with donating blood. This is evident in the very appropriation of the term "donation" to refer to selling plasma.

Gift rhetoric pervades donor advertising, as is evident if we look back over some of the ads we've seen. In the "Cool Cash" advertisement, for instance, the Plank Street Lab in Baton Rouge uses the gift metaphor twice--first in referring to the "donation" and second in stating that the Lab is a place "Where a good deed is a good deal." Similarly, the Sera-Tec fistful of dollars coupon offers the opportunity to be: "Helping Others While Helping Yourself."

Some ads don't explicitly make a "gift" reference, but nonetheless appeal to altruistic motivation, as in the case of a Sera-Tec advertisement that states, "Your plasma is urgently needed by the medical community."

The most developed treatment of gift rhetoric that we have found is in the Sacramento yellow pages. The ad begins by situating the business as an altruistic enterprise that is "Saving Lives & Helping Communities Grow!" It goes on to offer prospective donors the chance to "save a child's life, keep a family together and help strengthen your community through service." This ad is unique among the ads we've collected in that it also offers a truly altruistic scenario of making a monetary donation in the plasma donor's name to a civic organization. While most donors probably still take the cash themselves, the ad is a fairly effective moral framing device--certainly more effective than an ad from a New Orleans plasma center in which the row of dollar signs and emphasis on "Extra Cash Money" diminish the impact of the enjoinder to "Help Save Lives."

The "rhetoric of the gift relationship" is also emphasized in many of the posters that adorn plasma center walls. One poster in the Austin Plasma Center, for instance, showed a smiling young hemophilic boy standing beside a bicycle. The poster's caption reads, "Hey, plasma donor, thanks!"

The gift rhetoric sanitizes the blood trade in two ways. First, it highlights a socially valued identity for donors. Second, it frames plasma products in a positive

light, casting them as "medical service" rather than as commercial commodities--a definition that has profound implications for product liability.

The Rhetoric of "Medical Service and Technology"

The other rhetorical idiom plasma centers use is that of medical service and technology. Plasma center names frequently emphasize biomedical technology, as illustrated by companies like NABI BioMedicals; Alpha Therapeutics; Serologicals, Inc.; and Premier BioResources. Newspaper and yellow pages ads often highlight medical technology as well, as demonstrated in a New Orleans plasma center ad that highlights antibody testing and viral marking--technologies that are on the cutting edge of biomedical practice. PBI Plasma Center runs one of the more elaborate newspaper advertisements we've found and showcases medical service prominently by identifying a variety of ill people for whom plasma products are used: hemophiliacs, leukemia patients, burn victims, etc.

This medical rhetoric extends beyond advertisements into the centers themselves. In many centers (esp. those drawing mostly student donors) there is a conspicuous effort to maintain an antiseptic appearance. Not only phlebotomists and technicians, but often the entire staff wear white medical smocks. In some cases an effort is made to make the center look like a doctor's office or hospital. Espeland, for instance, reports a plasma center that prominently displayed medical journals in its reading rack.

Medical rhetoric sanitizes the blood trade physically and morally. The antiseptic atmosphere that is prevalent in college centers suggests that the staff are highly trained medical professionals, although in reality staff qualifications vary widely. The medical trappings also convey a sense of service consistent with the gift metaphor. The economic aspect is downplayed; ads for donors promote a vision of medical service that all participants ostensibly share.

Gift and medical rhetoric each figure in about 25 percent of the newspaper ads and show up in half to two-thirds of yellow pages ads. The very fact that plasma centers expend so much effort on these secondary framings is an indication of how useful they are felt to be in reducing industry stigma. But however useful they are, they ultimately bump up against two obdurate limits, one involving the stigmatization of donors in plasma centers and the other involving questions of legal liability for contaminated products.

Donor Stigmatization in Plasma Centers

The industry's sanitizing rhetorics sustain a less stigmatizing image for the plasma centers, but they don't reduce stigma much for visibly poor donors--especially the stigma from staff at the centers.

Staff frequently suspect donors of trying to hide health problems and life-style risks for which they would be rejected and this suspicion pervades their interactions. They mark donors' fingernails with phosphorescent ink to keep them from donating elsewhere; they post rules that may proscribe such benign activities as chewing gum and "closing your eyes" during the often long waits to donate. They demand obedience. Poor donors endure hours of boredom, self-degradation and physical discomfort in an environment that provides few opportunities to avow positive personal identities, but they still try. New donors occasionally distance themselves from the "plasma donor" role by telling those around them that they don't really need the money. Those who have been donating for a longer period of time may seek to make their experience meaningful by embracing the donor role as a "job." But many longterm donors are too cynical to do this. They grimly recognize their dependence on selling plasma, but see few other alternatives. Rather than viewing plasma donation as an "honest job," they often see it as a game of wits in which they're pitted against the plasma center staff. The game is to get to donate

even when they ought to reject you. Or, alternatively, to survive grotesque or painful treatment like phlebotomists having difficulty finding your veins.

Product Recipient Risks and Liability Protection

The failure of plasma center rhetoric to provide a nonstigmatized position for donors garners little concern or effort on the part of the plasma industry. The donors are left on their own to deal with their problems. The threat of product risks and liability suits, on the other hand, strikes directly at industry profits, and has therefore resulted in the marshalling of the industry's enormous resources.

Plasma manufacturers have tried to maximize product safety in several ways (including screening and manufacturing processes), but they're strongly opposed to restrictions on paid donation. They've also sought legal protection from liability for their products. In court they invoke "blood shield" statutes (originally written for nonprofits) that protect them from liability on the basis of inherent risk in a vitally important medical service (as opposed to a "product"--something that's easier to understand with nonprofit blood banks). But with powerful legal support and lobbying the industry has been effective legally define its reality. Over all, the courts have accepted their arguments and liability suits have seldom been successful.

CONCLUSION

So what are the implications of our analysis? The industry's rhetoric is representative of the growing set of industries that Andrew Kimbrell (1993) has recently termed the "human body shop." Plasma center rhetoric includes several strategies that are found in the body trade generally:

- Invocation of a pseudo-community that links the giver and receiver in a moral context (in fact, little in the plasma industry seems honestly altruistic).
- Use of medical purification rituals and rhetoric to overcome social problems and

transcend criticisms directed toward marketing and objectivizing the human body. Poor people have diseases? No problem. We can screen out the bad ones and do some clean-up too.

•Market rhetoric implies that the transaction is relatively balanced, while the playing field is actually highly uneven. Indeed, the entire relationship exemplifies Foucault's (1979) conception of the body as a central component in the operation of power relations, both for donors and product recipients.

•Silence and concealment. One finds no mention of the racial and class composition of the donor base in the industry's promotional materials. If the industry was really proud of donors it could do public relations work for African Americans and the homeless. But the silence itself is a rhetorical strategy to avoid confronting the industry's most intractable moral dilemma.

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